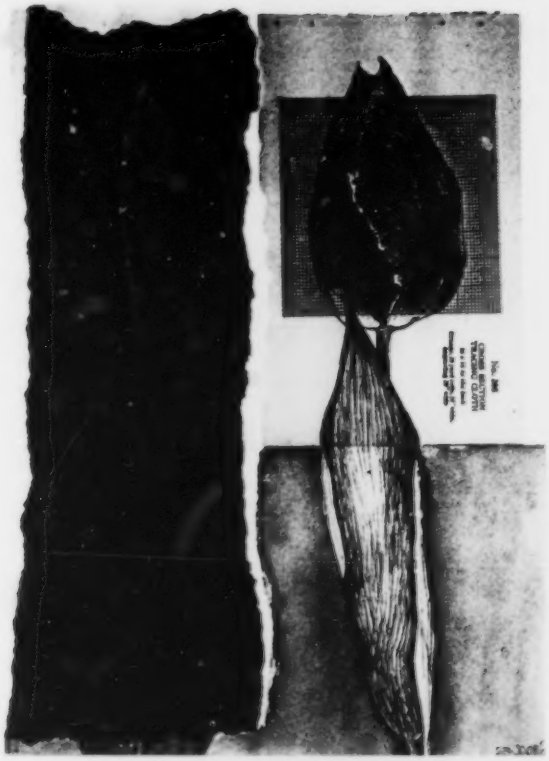
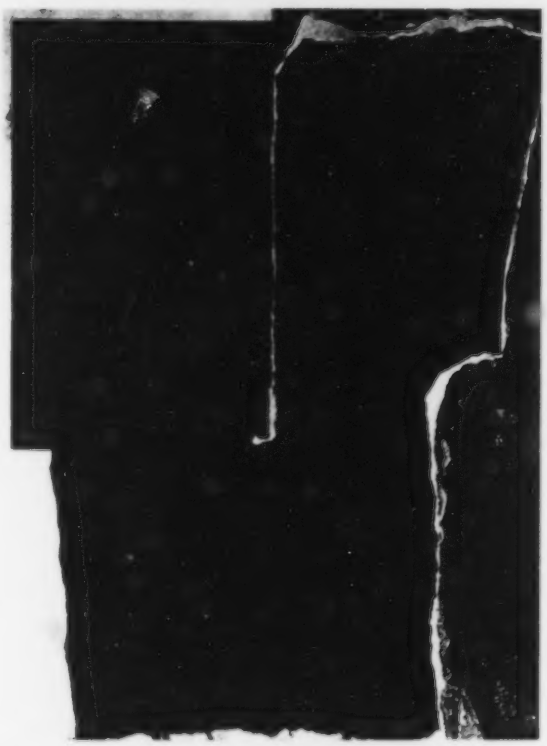


SUSAN WOOD: FLORILEGIUM

A BOOK OF FLOWERS



SUSAN WOOD
FLORILEGIUM
A BOOK OF FLOWERS

[T]HE POLEMIC IN FAVOUR OF ILLUSTRATION BY LEONHART FUCHS, INTRODUCING HIS GREAT BOOK OF BOTANICAL SCIENCE IN 1542 — CONFRONTS THOSE WHO "WILL CITE THE MOST INSIPID AUTHORITY OF GALEN THAT NO ONE WHO WANTS TO DESCRIBE PLANTS SHOULD TRY TO MAKE PICTURES OF THEM".[1]

In the early seventeenth century, Dutch businessman Emmanuel Sweert sold curiosities—stuffed birds, sea shells, and plant seeds— to Amsterdam's middle class, and tulip bulbs to both the wealthy locals and the royal courts of Europe. By way of a marketing strategy, Sweert published the first European sales catalogue for flowers in 1612, a compendium of drawings of plants from his nursery depicted in full colour (and with a decided emphasis on tulips). He entitled it Florilegium, the Latin word for a gathering—a book—of flowers. The title was soon adopted for other collections of botanical images, notable among them Banks' Florilegium, a collection of 738 engravings of plants discovered during Captain Cook's first around-the-world voyage in 1768-71.

Today, the word "florilegium" is more commonly used in a literary context (which is closer to the word's original intent) to refer to a collection of writings. But it is the botanical allusion from Sweert's day that is foregrounded in recent mixed media drawings on paper by Halifax-based artist Susan Wood. It perhaps best describes sequences of botanical images that find their expression via a book of paper samples she purchased some years ago, and through a number of old letters—personal correspondence— found in European antique shops by an artist friend. In this new work, Wood has undertaken an engagement with and exploration of the relationship between the visual and the textual which delineates that specialized image, the scientific illustration.

The two features of scientific illustration that have been identified—namely, that they are to be seen with associated text and that they impart information—are closely connected. This relationship is best appreciated if we classify scientific illustrations according to the degree to which they are integrated with textual and other kinds of symbolic images.[2]

Wood's career-long engagement with drawing has constituted a rigorous enquiry into the role and place of the medium, one which occurs within the current context of painting's occupation of the

aesthetic apex. But perhaps more importantly, her work touches upon some of the issues surrounding the increasing mediation of new technologies (digital imaging processes and techniques, for example) in the visual —and of particular interest here, the scientific —representation of the world. Considered at an entirely superficial level, Woods' drawings appear to fall squarely within a tradition of scientific illustration: they are intensely representational things, images of some of the birds and botanical species that are a part of the natural history of our world.

However, through Wood's aesthetic use of textual elements, and her insistence on the equivalency of image and image plane—of a commensurability between the drawing itself and the paper substrate which enables it expression— her work transcends the limited and highly specific didactic function of scientific images[3]. As part of their utilitarian role, scientific drawings are part and parcel of an encompassing textual context. In effect, they are secondary things, subsumed to the primacy of the printed word that in turn permits them to have meaning. While the work that comprises *Florilegium (A Book of Flowers)* nods broadly toward this hierarchical structure, Wood intentionally subverts the obligations of such image making, reversing roles and instead situating textual elements in secondary and supporting capacities within an encompassing (and primary) visual context. The picture, then, comes first. Words are at its beck and call.

❦

Leav-ings (2000) begins and ends—quite literally—with a purchase Wood made years ago in an antique store: the book *Samples of Paper for Engineers, Architects and Draughtsmen* printed by the Hughes-Owen Company Ltd as a means of advertising the wide varieties of paper the company produced. The pages of different paper types—each with its name and available size printed directly onto its surface—comprising the volume were transformed by Wood into an interrelated sequence of forty-two mixed-media drawings (a process which included the use of the both the book's frontispiece and its endpiece). In *Leav-ings* #8, for instance, Wood employs a sheet of "'Dominion' Tracing Paper (No. 175)" as the central part of a collage of separate paper elements (including a piece of graph paper and a heavier stock paper as backing support for the work) all of which are integral to the image of a tulip which begins at the bottom of the piece as the simple outline of the plant's stem and which progresses vertically up through the work to become fleshed out as a watercolour flower. In *Leav-ings #38*, a drawing of thistles cuts across (and extends beyond) two stacked and abutting pieces of Hughes-Owens paper, the upper of which is stamped "'Invincible' Drawing Paper (No. 55)," the lower with its text blacked out by Wood, save for the word "Drawing". And in *Leav-ings #40*, it is a piece of "Cross Section Ruled Paper No. 365" which forms the basis for a drawing of a group of irises.

In *Leav-ings*, the motives of the scientific illustration find expression; the textual identification printed on each individual sheet of paper minimally satisfies its conditions. But it is merely a relationship between text and material that is so set out, and one into which Wood actively interferes, wresting the conditions for the making of metaphor from

the narrow, commercially motivated "call and answer" of text and paper in the forty two pages (including frontispiece and endpiece) of *Samples of Paper for Engineers, Architects and Draughtsmen.*

The sequence of drawings *Italian Letters* (2002-2003) finds its source in hotel stationary, specifically letterhead from the "Hotel Parco Dei Principi" in Rome. Wood uses sheets of the stationary— the text of the hotel name prominent at the top—as part of a series of nine interconnected diptychs in which the representational is coupled and contrasted with the abstract. On the left, a sheet of the printed stationary hosts an image of a flower, root, and even a small bird (the only one in the entire exhibition) and the panel of paper on the right devoid of any text is instead characterized by an assortment abstract marks, stains and droplets.

The abstraction is, in fact, the residue of Wood's markmaking activities, for these panels are the backing surfaces—the blotters, if you will— atop which she works. It is here she test colours, shakes drops of ink from her pens, and experiments with the quality of her line. For Wood, surfaces that most of us would consider as little more than disposable detritus are, rather, highly meaningful artefacts of the drawing process. Even more, they are drawings themselves, as legitimate as are any of her representational images, and in fact they are the very source for the representational components of *Italian Letters:* the shape and subtle shade of a stain suggests a dried lily for Wood; blotches of paint and bold streaks of colour cutting across the blotter echoing the stem of a dried root; or the small, oval blobs on another sheet evoking the dried pistils of a tulip.

Use of these blotter sheets is in itself nothing new in Wood's work. They figure in some of the bird images that were a part of a previous solo exhibition of bird and botanical images, *Taxonomies.* In those pieces —like the drawing *Cormorant* (1997), in which the image of the bird traverses three blotter sheets mounted on a paper backing—Wood works right into the already marked surface, directly combining the drawn image with the residual elements of previous mark-making activities. In the nine diptychs of *Italian Letters*, images and their leavings abut one another. In a take on the text/image structure of the scientific image, each element—the representational and the abstract— finds meaning only in the presence of the other.

Scripted Tulips (2002-2003) comprises a series of mixed media drawings of tulips into which Wood has again woven elements of text. Here, the use of found texts that marks the *Leav-ings* series and the diptychs of *Italian Letters* is given a twist. No more the overprinted paper sample or commercial letterhead. Rather, it is the cursive flow of handwriting that predominates: snippets and fragments from personal letters acquired in European antique and second-hand shops by a now-deceased artist friend.

Handwriting was an integral part of the bird and botanical drawings of *Taxonomies.* Wood's own, it was employed as a visual device to aesthetically echo the labels curatorially attached to the bird specimens from which she drew at the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History in Halifax, or in the instance of some botanical images, simply used to give a name and date for a work ("Withered Narcissus, June 1996"). In *Scripted Tulips* we encoun-

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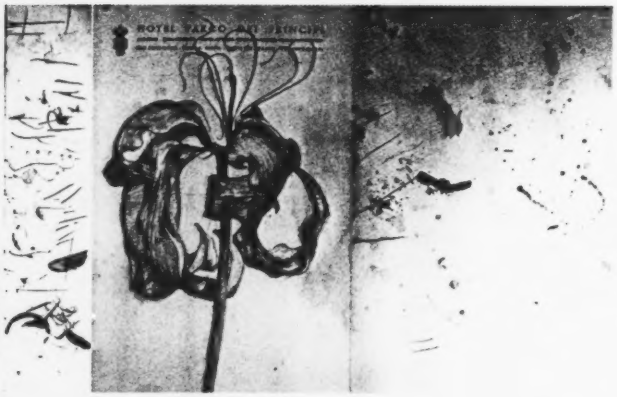
ter the writing of other hands as well as the unreadable text. The fragments of cursive writing Wood has worked into the drawings of flowers—typically framing an image by their situation both above and below it — are things of elegant beauty, but are in a language to which we are not privy and so telling of things which we know not. What we do no doubt correctly assume, however, is that what is written in these pieces of personal correspondence has nothing at all to do with Wood's drawings (and very likely nothing to do with tulips). So the point of it all isn't semantic, and has nothing to do with a cogent relationship between word and image that is in any way explanatory, descriptive or commentative. With *Scripted Tulips*, Wood again messes about with the paradigmatic structure of the scientific illustration, but even more importantly, she disrupts our didactic expectation of what such images are intended to do. Meaning, here, is deferred, and so the possibilities of metaphor are enabled, proliferating and flourishing in the absence of any fixed significations.



The drawings of Susan Wood fall loosely within the historical confines of the medium's aesthetic and scientific uses, but are in no way confined or restricted by any attempt to adhere to their normative expectations. Though her drawings are intensive things of the hand and eye, investigatory products of her rigorous studio practice (centered, as it is, on drawing as a central and daily activity in her life), and though they are decidedly representational things, their seeing is never had at the price of the repression of the underlying structural armature that permits their being. In contrast to much mainstream artistic and scientific drawing (within which I would include technologically mediated work like that done on computers using specialized software) Wood's art has long comprised a fecund dialogue between form and content. She approaches her preferred medium in such a way as to ensure that images—whether the flowers and plants that comprise *Florilegium (A Book of Flowers)*, or the mix of botanical and bird images that made up *Taxonomies*—never overwhelm or supersede their supporting surfaces, and so render them passive and mute. Drawing ultimately occupies a aesthetic space equivalent to its ground of paper, and in that very ratio can be found the essence of Susan Wood's confrontation with "the most insipid authority of Galen." She does not, in fact, seek to describe the botanical world. She would simply rather try to make pictures of it.

Gil McElroy
February 2003

Notes

1 Martin Kemp. "Temples of the Body and Temples of the Cosmos: Vision and Visualization in the Vesalian and Copernican Revolutions." *Picturing Knowledge: Historical and Philosophical Problems Concerning the Use of Art in Science.* Brian S. Baigrie, ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. p. 40.

2 *Picturing Knowledge: Historical and Philosophical Problems Concerning the Use of Art in Science.* p. xix.

3 See my catalogue essay for *Taxonomies: New Drawings by Susan Wood.* Charlottetown: Confederation Centre Art Gallery & Museum, 1999.

Italian Letters, 315 x 27 cm, 2002-2003

LIST OF WORKS

All works collection of the artist, unless otherwise noted. Mixed media on paper.

1. **Italian Letters**
   315 x 27 cm, 2002-2003

2. **Stuff I found in my Garden** (12 Panels), 2002-2003

#1 35 x 26.8 cm
(Stuff I found in my garden)
#2 35.5 x 26.8 cm
(Poppy Seed Pods)
#3 35 x 25.7 cm
(Cone flowers gone to seed)
#4 35.3 x 25.5 cm
(Overlaping Lillies)
#5 35 x 25.5 cm (Fallen Bloom)
#6 35.5 x 25.5 cm (no inscription)
#7 a) Dried Daffodil (group of 3)
35.5 x 28.5 cm
b) Narcissus
35.8 x 26.8 cm
c) Daffodil Bulb
35.5 x 25.3 cm
#8 35.5 x 25.5 cm
#9 36 x 26.5 cm
#10 36.5 x 25.6 cm

Anonymous was a Woman, 2003

3. #1 76.5 x 56.8 cm
4. #2 76.5 x 56.3 cm
5 #3 76.3 x 56.3 cm
6. #4 76.8 x 56.3 cm

Slippage, 2002-2003

7. #1 77.5 x 55 cm
8. #2 77.8 x 55.3 cm
9. #3 77.8 x 55.3 cm

Scripted Tulip, 2003

10. #1 76 x 56.5 cm
11. #2 76.3 x 57 cm
12. #3 76 x 57 cm
13. #4 76.2 x 43.5 cm
Collection of Mern O'Brien
14. #5 76.5 x 56.5 cm
15. #6 75.8 x 56.5 cm
16. #7 76 x 56.5 cm
17. #8 76 x 56.5 cm

Lily, 2002-2003

18. Lily Page 1 76.5 x 57 cm
19. Lily Page 2 76.5 x 57 cm
20. Lily Page 3 76.5 x 57 cm
21. Lily Page 4 76.5 x 57 cm

Leave-ings, 2000

22. #1 35 x 26.3 cm
23. #2 35.5 x 25 cm
24. #6 49 x 38.8 cm
Collection of Steve and Heidi Sayles
25. #7 49.3 x 38.8 cm
26. #8 49.3 x 38.8 cm
Collection of Christine Ross
27. #22 49.3 x 38.8 cm
Collection of Mary Sparling
28. #23 49 x 38.8 cm
29. #29 49.3 x 39 cm
30. #30 49.3 x 39 cm
31. #32 49.3 x 39 cm
Collection of Candace Stevenson
32. #33 49.3 x 39 cm
33. #36 49.5 x 66 cm
34. #37 49.5 x 66 cm
35. #38 49.5 x 66.5 cm
Collection of Karen and Tom Traves
36. #39 49.5 x 66.5 cm
Collection of Karen and Tom Traves
37. #40 49.3 x 66 cm
38. #41 49.3 x 66 cm
39. #42 35.8 x 26.7 cm

SUSAN WOOD:
FLORILEGIUM
(BOOK OF FLOWERS)
19 July, 2003 – 07 September, 2003
Fourth Floor, Gallery South (25)
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

Curator: Gil McElroy, AGNS Guest Curator

Printed in Canada
© 2003 Art Gallery of Nova Scotia
ISBN

Published by the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia
PO Box 2262
1723 Hollis Street
Halifax, Nova Scotia B3J 3C8
www.agns.gov.ns.ca

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Design/photography: Semaphor.ca
Printing: Bounty Print

The exhibition was made possible with support received from

NOVA SCOTIA
Tourism and Culture

The Canada Council for the Arts
Le Conseil des Arts du Canada

Art Gallery *of* Nova Scotia

Cover images:
Leave-ings, #30 and #33, each 49.3 x 39 cm, 2000

BIOGRAPHY

Susan Wood was born in Saint John, N.B. and grew up in Amherst N.S. She attended Mount Allison University (BFA 1976), participated in the BanffWinter Studio Program (1976-77) and received an MFA from The University of Calgary (1981). She spent several years in Newfoundland, where shew as a founding member of the Eastern Edge Gallery in St. John's, before moving to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Since 1990 she has been assistant professor at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Wood has participated in numerous group exhibitions across Canada and in Finland, Scotland, and Germany, and has also held a number of solo shows including her nationally touring Devil's Purse, Dress Drawings and Taxonomies. She is the recipient of grant awards from the Canada Council, the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council and the Nova Scotia Arts Council, and her work is represented in private, corporate and public collections across Canada, UK and in the USA. She lives in Halifax.

AGKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to my family for their ongoing support and encouragement. It has been a delight to work with the curator, Gil McElroy, in our second joint venture: I appreciate his intrepretation of my work and have always enjoyed his writings. Thanks to Ineke Graham, Studio 21, and a special thank you to those who loaned work from their private collections for this exhibition. A thank you to the (often) unknowable viewers who take the time to look at the work, I hope it gives something back. And last, but not least, thanks to Ray Cronin and the staff at the AGNS.